

TESTIMONY OF  
  
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BEFORE THE  
  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION  
  
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
  
U.S. SENATE

CONCERNING  
  
INS REFORM: THE SERVICE SIDE

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## Introduction

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I'm very pleased that you have chosen to use today's hearing to focus on the issue of service at Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Our customers are diverse and the services they seek from us are compelling. Every decision we make has the potential to have a substantial impact on the lives of the people we serve.

The work we do every day can mean the difference between whether a mother and daughter may be reunited after years apart, whether a couple separated by an ocean will be able to marry, whether a couple living here can adopt a foreign child, if a business can hire a much needed employee or whether a university can enroll a top foreign student. Our work will determine as profound an issue as whether people can come to this country to make their own American dreams come true to as basic an issue of whether they will be inspected quickly enough when they arrive here to make their connecting flights.

To be frank with you, the issue of customer service has not gotten as much attention as it deserves. As Commissioner, I can tell you that we are clearly not where we want to be in providing service to our customers.

We are not as timely as we want to be.

We are not always as courteous as we should be.

In fact, the history of the agency, despite the thousands of committed and hardworking employees has never had a culture that truly emphasizes the importance of service and rewards it, although there clearly needs to be one.

We are committed to changing that. And we are doing so.

We have already laid some good groundwork. Now we hope to win your support for fundamentally restructuring INS to build customer service into the way we do business everyday.

We want to take an institution with a weak track record for service and turn it into a world class service agency.

We want to bring the same level of emphasis to bear on the services side of INS as we did on the enforcement side to produce the same kind of results.

What will it take?

We need to reach the following goals:

First, we must establish and enforce high standards of service consistently nationwide - so that individuals are not advantaged or disadvantaged, as they are now, by where they live. People in Boston should get the same high level of service as those in

Detroit.

We must use modern technology and business practices to maximize efficiency.

We must improve our customer's access to information-whether it is getting a citizenship application or the status of a Green Card request-so that they can use the phone or Internet rather than coming to our office in person.

We must locate our offices conveniently to the people and communities we serve. These offices must be customer friendly - in the way they look, feel and operate.

We must develop a better trained work force of individuals who choose to develop a career in service--not as it is now, where the best way to climb the career ladder of INS is through proving yourself as an enforcement officer.

Our experience in fixing the broken asylum system in 1995 demonstrates our ability to institute meaningful reform. We developed a new service-oriented model of handling asylum applicants' claims in a careful and timely manner, by separating asylum functions out of busy District offices and into new Asylum offices where we recruited, trained and equipped a new "Asylum Corps" to handle the unique nature of the job. These changes produced dramatic results.

Reaching these goals agency-wide relies on two basic things: building our infrastructure and overhauling our structure.

Let me give you an overview of where we started, where we have come, and where we must go.

## History

As you know, this Administration made immigration a priority from the beginning. The difficulty was that INS had been so badly neglected, that for the first two years our energies were almost solely devoted to conducting triage to solve critical problems that had undermined immigration enforcement in this country altogether.

Five years ago, the Southwest border was completely out of control, the asylum system was badly abused and criminal and illegal aliens had little fear of ever actually being deported. Since then, with the Congress' support, we have made tremendous progress addressing those urgent illegal immigration problems.

It is not that customer service issues were off the radar screen. It is just that they were not flashing as brightly or urgently as the enforcement problems that had to become our first priority.

## How Today's Backlogs Began

In FY 1995, needs on the services side of the agency became more clear as they became more urgent. That is when we were hit with an avalanche of applications that we have never been able to climb out from under.

Congress had just passed a new law, 245(i), that enabled people to adjust their status through INS in the U.S. --rather than overseas through State Department consulates. In just the first 10 weeks after it was enacted, we received 180,000 applications. As a result, by the end of 1995, the number of people applying to INS for status changes more than doubled.

In that same year, the political climate for immigrants began to change. Proposition 187 had just passed in California and the country was beginning a new round of debate about the future of legal immigration. Literally hundreds of thousands of additional people began to apply for citizenship to secure their status.

Since I began my tenure, the number of people applying for status adjustment and naturalization has doubled and the waiting times for citizenship and other adjudications have increased to completely unacceptable levels.

## Workload

In addition, our workload goes beyond adjudicating applications for immigration benefits.

The range and scope of our customer service responsibilities is very broad and the number of people we serve - in some way- each day is also on the rise.

For example, with international trade and travel on the rise, we inspect over a million people a day coming in through our land, sea and air ports.

We take an average of 14,000 calls a day through our Phone and Service Centers.

We interview thousands of people a day in our district offices.

We fill requests for about 3,000 forms a day through our Forms Center.

We provide information to nearly 8,000 people daily on our website.

We produce about 5,000 state of the art Green Cards and work authorization permits daily.

### What We Can Do About It

We want to not only handle this growth in demand for services--we truly want to EXCEL at it.

The challenges we face on the services side are not unlike the ones we faced five years ago. Just as the nation had failed to create an immigration agency capable of truly enforcing the immigration laws, we had also failed to create an agency capable of delivering modern day services.

We had never built the proper infrastructure.

In recent years, we have begun to construct one. But we now recognize that infrastructure alone is not going to be enough, given the tremendous growth in the size of the agency and the new mandates we are responsible for handling.

We have just completed working with management experts at Booz, Allen and Hamilton and determined that to truly create a service oriented organization capable of

realizing the goals I outlined earlier, we need a fundamentally new structure.

We need to separate INS service and enforcement functions so that each side has a clear chain of command that develops a sharper focus on its responsibilities, while still supporting a joint mission.

The service side of the agency has long been overshadowed by enforcement and must be able to grow on its own with its own staff who focus on service delivery and who are held accountable for it.

Our restructuring proposal calls for eliminating today's regional and district offices and replacing them with offices tasked solely with either service or enforcement responsibilities. Service offices would be responsible for handling all adjudications and providing information. We would bolster our ability to help people without their needing to physically come to our offices. Where we do need to see people in person, we would make it more convenient by locating our facilities closer to our customers.

Enforcement offices would be organized with staff from multiple enforcement disciplines to comprehensively address the challenges at the border and in the interior of the country and be located where there are enforcement vulnerabilities.

We would create two different chains of command from the top of the agency to the smallest offices in the field. This would strengthen accountability by creating clear reporting relationships and manageable spans of control.

We would develop clear career paths --one for service and one for enforcement--



in order to recruit, train and retain the best employees with the right skills and abilities for their jobs.

With an entire chain of command whose top priority is delivering service, we can set standards for what customers can expect nationwide and hold our staff accountable for meeting them. We can develop consistent standards for how long it should take a naturalization applicant to get to an oath ceremony and how many minutes it should take to find out by phone how to apply.

The Administration's restructuring proposal will ensure the best return on investment from new technological platforms and lead to better record keeping methods, better ways of providing information, more outreach to customer groups, and improved facilities.

Let me tell you the status of these and how our restructuring proposal will support them --starting with the technological tools that really define our capabilities to function.

## **BUILDING BLOCKS**

They determine our efficiency, our speed and the way we share information between INS Offices and with our customers.

This means installing both basic computers and high tech information systems.

## Automation

We have made enormous inroads bringing the agency's computer capabilities up to date -especially when we started a decade late.

Remember what businesses and government agencies were like when every staff person didn't have a personal computer? When using e-mail or accessing databases was still a novelty? When records were stored in file rooms in manila folders and not in computers where they could be called up for reference in a matter of seconds? When each local office couldn't communicate by computer or share case files?

This is what INS looked like until too recently. Our productivity and service capabilities were hamstrung by the fact that many offices lacked basic tools, such as personal computers.

In the last five years, we have been able to put computers on the majority of desks. By the end of next fiscal year, we hope to complete our work of making a computer available to every employee whose work could be more effective or effective by using one. This has tremendously improved the way we do business.

We have also designed computer programs that have reduced the amount of paperwork that created bottlenecks. And we have created other computer innovations for which we have received top awards from Federal Computer News and other recognition.

This year, we have begun installing a comprehensive, new computer database and

tracking system, called CLAIMS 4, that will allow our offices to share individual case information and enable our staff and our customers to quickly check the status of cases. It will also help strengthen our quality assurance process by ensuring that cases move forward only when each step in the application process is appropriately completed.

Despite these leaps forward, we are still behind the technological curve. In 1998, with 25 million files located in 80 offices all around the country, we are still reliant on paper case files.

### Centralized Records

We are in the process, however, of centralizing all of these records so that we can improve the way we store and handle customers' case information.

Outdated, decentralized record keeping is the reason for lost files-- a problem that creates delays for people at the beginning and end of the application process. If we can't find a naturalization applicant's permanent file, for example, our Service Center must wait three months before creating a temporary file and moving the application forward. If the permanent file is never found, that person's case must be reviewed by a supervisor before it is granted -- an extra step that can further slow down the case.

In November, we asked Congress to approve a comprehensive plan to move our paper records out of file rooms into a central facility where they will be reconciled with information in our automated computer databases. This will allow INS to rely more on electronic data available. This proposal is still pending.

In the meantime, offices like Los Angeles need workspace for the new staff they have hired to help reduce the case backlog. L.A. has rooms literally filled to the ceiling with boxes of files that need to be archived - space that could be used to house new employees.

We hope to move forward to resolve the physical storage issues and overcome the problems of lost files.

#### Remote Services

In addition to strengthening the way we handle the information that relates to our customers internally, we have begun to create better ways of communicating with them externally.

We want to make sure that people don't have to come to an INS office every time they need information. Three years ago, our customers had few options but to visit a district office and wait in line or try repeatedly to get through busy telephone lines. The stories I heard about people running up huge long distance bills while they waited on the telephone for us were nightmarish. Today, while those stories are not as common, they are still too frequent.

Although there is now a much better phone system in place for many of our customers, it is still not good enough, particularly in the Western part of the country. We have given our customers the option of telephoning a centralized information office or using the

Internet to get basic facts and forms, but both our Western Phone Center and our Website need to be improved.

## Phone Centers

In 1996, we created two Phone Centers where customers can call for answers on eligibility for benefits, application procedures and individual case status. The Eastern Phone Center enables people for the first time to call INS toll free 24 hours a day for recorded messages and from 8-6 for personal assistance. This year we had planned to make the same toll-free service available to our customers in the West, but had to reduce the funding we had set aside for it, when Congress directed that we reallocate \$38 million in base fee resources to improve the naturalization process.

We carefully monitor our performance at each of these centers because we want to deliver service that is on par with industry standards, and while we're not there yet, we're not too far off in the Eastern Phone Center. The industry standard is to answer calls within 45 seconds, and we know we are doing so for calls coming into our eastern center. In addition, the average industry standards for those callers who hang up before their call is answered is 2% and our rate is 6%.

Unfortunately in the West, where we have far fewer staff to answer fewer lines, we are falling terribly short of meeting the industry standards.

## Website

In addition to these phone options, INS launched a Website in August 1996 and augmented it last October. We are still working to improve it. It was recently ranked by a search engine company as in the top 5% of federal Websites for usage. It averages 233,000 visitors each month. Customers are downloading 55,000 forms per month. Individuals can pull forms down directly or request that they be sent to a specific address. While we realize not everyone has access to this service, immigration advocates and attorneys can make these requests as well.

## Forms Centers

In addition to information access, we are also committed to ensuring that customers have quick access to the forms they need. In the last year, we have expanded the capabilities of our Form Centers to respond faster to requests. This year, our average response time is 3 to 5 days -- a vast improvement over last year's when requests took as long as 10 days to fill.

## Facilities

While we work to improve the number of options customers have to obtain information from INS without going to an actual INS office, we are in the midst of both revamping our current offices and rethinking the way to use them in the future. We want them to be easier for the immigrant community to access and more customer oriented once they are there.

For example, when we began to require applicants to have their fingerprints taken at an INS facility last year, we created new offices known as Application Support Centers (ASCs) in communities across the country. These offices, like our asylum offices whose sole purpose is to serve applicants, are the pre-cursor for the kind of facilities we want to create under our restructuring plan.

Under restructuring, we want to develop "Immigrant Services" offices that will provide a range of services from fingerprinting to interviewing to testing. Depending on community needs, some offices may be configured as full-service centers and others will serve as satellite locations to perform specific functions.

Like the Application Support Centers, they will be located in immigrant communities, where public transportation and parking is accessible. Each is being designed with standard, customer-friendly features, like comfortable waiting areas, clear signage and some evening and weekend hours.

We are carefully monitoring our service at these fingerprinting centers using customer service surveys that are forwarded to us weekly. I am pleased to report that in the last week of May, 98% of our customers rated the "helpfulness" and "courtesy" of staff either excellent or good. 93% found information posted on signs to be excellent or good and 95% of them spent less than an hour getting fingerprinted--65% under a half hour.

We estimate that more than two million people will use the ASCs on a yearly

basis.

Unfortunately, we do not have the same quality at the rest of our facilities. Overall, the agency needs one-third more space than we currently occupy, which means we are quite literally busting out at the seams. No major office is in what you or I would define as good enough shape for our employees or for the people we serve.

Most of the larger offices are being renovated or have plans to be renovated. Even some new offices are outgrowing their current space. Many of these growth issues would be aided by restructuring - given that new offices won't require housing all of the functions currently required of them.

#### Border Facilitation

Customer service is not just about how we provide better service to the immigrant community. It is also about how we interact with commuters and other travelers who cross our borders every day.

In the last several years, we have made tremendous improvements in reducing the amount of time people must wait at U.S. port of entry to be inspected.

For example, it was not uncommon for airplane passengers to wait for inspection for over an hour in line. Now wait times there and at other international airports are consistently within the 45 minutes mandated by Congress.



In addition, in working to facilitate cross-border commerce and reduce wait times for commuters between Mexico and the United States, INS set its own goal of 20-minute wait times at land ports. We have met this goal most dramatically at the world's busiest land border port in San Diego, where commuters used to wait for more than two hours.

We have also piloted the SENTRI, at the San Diego-Tijuana border, a dedicated commuter lane for low-risk, frequent travelers that utilizes various technologies and enables pre-screened enrollees to further reduce their wait times to under three minutes. Based on this success, INS is currently exporting this technology to other border ports of entry including those in Michigan, Texas and New York,

#### Community Relations Officers

While utilizing technology is critical and helpful to cutting down the time it takes, we need to make the effort to listen to our customers and respond to their needs to truly be customer-oriented.

We have put a premium on local offices building relationships with the communities they serve. In the last several years, many more of our offices have established community advisory groups or other outreach mechanisms, and our regional offices and largest districts have hired community relations officers. By doing so, we have increased our understanding of community issues and customer service needs.

In the past, INS relied mostly on individual contacts to communicate new information to the public. In recent years, INS has established a range of partnerships

with stakeholders--state and local governments and business and trade associations--to ensure that critical information gets to the audiences who need it. These networks helped communicate major provisions of the 1996 immigration law and important new initiatives.

## Staffing

Taking the time to understand and work with the community, as well as giving each customer the time and attention he or she deserves is in large part a function of having the right number of staff and the right staff to do the job.

We currently lack sufficient staff dedicated to service functions. We need adjudicators to examine applications, information officers to handle applicants' questions and administrative staff to provide clerical help and simply answer the phones.

The huge rise in applicants has not been matched by a concurrent increase in staff to process their paperwork and interview them.

This has not only contributed to longer waiting times, but it has also consumed the time and attention of staff, making it harder for them to give each customer the quality of service they deserve.

Congress has allowed us to use funding for temporary staff, but we want to invest training and time in full-time employees to ensure they feel invested in us and our customers, and that they are truly accountable to both.

We must be able to offer people permanent positions and opportunities for advancement in order to recruit and retain the best people. And we must be able to hold our staff accountable for the service they offer. It must be timely, efficient and courteous.

Under our restructuring proposal, by creating a new chain of command in which staff is responsible solely for service delivery, we will be able to increase accountability and expand the advancement possibilities for people who consistently meet the standards we expect of them.

#### Resource Limitations

New staff and the other infrastructure building blocks require new investments. Let me explain what INS' limitations are in making them.

Fundamentally, INS does not have the additional funding or the flexibility in using available receipts to meet these growing needs.

Staff, computers and other tools for service functions are underwritten by our customers themselves through the fees they pay into the Exams Fee Account. These vital resources do not receive any appropriated funds. The Exams Fee Account is the sole source of funding. The problem with that is: after conducting an extensive study of our fee structure, INS now knows the fees we are collecting do not cover the real cost of doing business.

Secondly, when we do have available receipts that can be used to improve services, we need to ask Congress for permission first.

Those requests are not always granted and are not always timely. For example, as I mentioned earlier we have tried for several years to hire full-time adjudicators and clerks to stabilize the workforce that processes naturalization applications.

As you are well aware, we are now in a very troubling Catch 22 situation. We now we must increase fees to improve customer service, but we also want our customers get the service they deserve. Without the proposed fee revision, we will not be able to maintain the current service level, and will also not have sufficient funding for improvements.

To make matters worse, for several years, we were able to subsidize funding with 245(i) penalty revenue; however, in January 1997, Congress redirected these funds to detention activities, resulting in a loss of \$130 million to the Exams Fee Account.

I often hear our critics cite the enormous influx of new resources INS has been given in the last several years. They wonder why we are not doing a better job on the service side.

But the new Border Patrol agents, scopes and sensors that have helped stem the flow of illegal immigrants at the Southwest border do not help the hundreds of thousands of legal residents who have been waiting to become citizens.

New detention space, buses and deportation officers have certainly helped remove record numbers of people here illegally, but they have not impacted the backlog in the thousands of people waiting to adjust their status to live here legally.

In other words, in the enforcement arena, where INS has been given new resources to do our job. we have performed successfully. On the service side, where there are not adequate resources to do the job. We cannot perform the way we want to--or the way we are expected to.

Nonetheless, INS can certainly make some improvements without more money or more staff.

It doesn't take new resources to be courteous. And I am all too aware of the complaints we receive about rudeness. There is no excuse for that.

While our staff is trained and expected to behave courteously at all times, I plan to recommit the agency to improving the way we deal with our customers on a daily basis. Beginning this fall, employees in our large district offices will participate in a customer service training effort. We will follow that up with a series of initiatives to engage all INS employees in efforts to take a customer friendly approach to everything we do.

For example, we will follow through with the Vice President's directive to communicate more clearly in simple English and not bureaucratic language that is often confusing. This summer we will start an effort to make our written communication with

customers clearer and more consistent across the country.

## Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, I have now given you an overview of how much work has been done and how much there truly is left to do to improve services that INS performs.

Whether it is centralizing our records or creating accountability for quality, we are committed to delivering better service. All of these pieces I have outlined will enable us to transform INS into a service-oriented agency.

I am confident that the barriers to better service can be removed by continuing to build the infrastructure and by restructuring the agency.

It is a big challenge, but it is one we are committed to overcoming.